

„...Intersectionality : here is the buzzword...“

An interview with Prof. Jasbir K. Puar on her research, interdisciplinarity, intersectionality and assemblages

At the conference „De/Constructions of Occidentalism“ in Berlin (June 21–23) we met Prof. Jasbir K. Puar, assistant professor of Women's and Gender Studies at Rutgers University (USA), who describes herself as an interdisciplinary, transnational feminist scholar. With the upcoming conference „Travelling Concepts“ in mind we took the opportunity to talk to Prof. Puar about her research and her teaching.

I Bettina Büchler, Anja Sieber, Sara Landolt*

Prof. Puar, you used to work on queer tourism, queer diasporas and transnationalism, and now your research is concerned with the war on terror. What are the recurrent themes of your work ?

I was planning to write a book on gay and lesbian tourism, which had come out of my dissertation research. And then September 11 happened, and that just changed the focus of my work entirely. So in that sense there's been a pretty intense thematic rupture. However, I would say that the way in which I have approached those topics is not dissimilar at all. Everything I do is about a transnational methodology or a transnational feminist approach, about unearthing the ways in which certain categories get mobilized.

You describe yourself as an interdisciplinary scholar. What is your relationship to disciplines ? Should we get rid of them altogether ?

I don't think it's possible to get rid of disciplines because that would mean a complete overhaul of epistemology per se and institutionalization of epistemological strands. I mean : We could get rid of disciplinarity but can we get rid of institutionalization ? Disciplines rise and fall and part of interdisciplinarity is to be able to historicize the foundations of disciplines – why they come about.

So instead of getting rid of the disciplines it's really about a critical approach and a disloyalty to the guiding expectations of a discipline. So when you say should we get rid of disciplinarity, it becomes very complicated because interdisciplinarity itself is an adapted form now that doesn't necessarily challenge disciplinarity. It's just become another way of organizing a relationship to disciplines. Interdisciplinarity is first and foremost an engagement with disciplinarity, it can't excuse itself from that. But at the same time there's pressure institutionally – interdisciplinarity is very sexy, it's very interesting, people are always saying this is what needs to happen, but when you look at it institutionally it's very hard to get hired as an interdisciplinary scholar. For instance : I don't have a discipline. I really don't have loyalty to a discipline because my masters is in Women's Studies and my PhD is in ethnic studies, and so when I was hired at Rutgers it turned out that they were not able to house my position in Women's Studies because they were a program and not a department. So they said „Pick a discipline !“

and I picked geography. And so the interdisciplinarity that runs through my work is really about problematizing certain politics of loyalty to a disciplinary canon, the gate-keeping around disciplinary methods, disciplinary literatures. It's really about a politics of disloyalty.

Another thing that seems to run through your work is your concern with intersectionality, that is the way in which social categories such as race, class and gender interact. What chances and limits do you see to intersectionality as a concept ?

What I see pedagogically happening is that in Women's Studies instructors are using intersectionality as a shortcut to signal difference. „Intersectionality“ : here is the buzzword. I've seen it used as a sound bite to say „Well, everyone's got these different identities, and they play out differently in different space and time“, and that just leaves it as completely disvacuous, dehistoricized, untheorized concept that I think is really problematic.

What is really important about intersectionality is that it needs to be taught as a conceptual tool, the same way that hybridity, hyphenated identity and multiculturalism is taught ; it is a conceptual tool that people started using in order to talk about social realities that needs to be historicized as a very specific moment in U.S. feminist theorizing. Coming out of the Combahee Black River Collective, coming out of Audre Lorde, and Lorde's work coming out of a lot of Black feminist thought, Kimberley Crenshaw... It can't just be passed off as „Here's how we qualify difference“, it needs to be historicized in the same ways as we would historicize something like the rise of a concept called hybridity.

Maybe the main thing is that I am concerned about the ways in which intersectionality still freezes both space and time. The intersectionality of the identity is located in some kind of timeless and aspatial body. It's a way in which the identity can be multiple, and you've got your race-class-gender, and you add to that sexuality, nation, religion and so on. So you've got the components, but identity as a temporal and spatial process doesn't necessarily get addressed in addressing these components. Identification is a process, it's a continuing modality of identification, it's not something that just freezes and then you can start talking about these various things. And I don't think that even sophisticated analyses of intersec-

tionality have really been able to address that.

Another thing is how do we get intersectionality outside of a U.S. feminist frame, and how does it become transnationalized, and that links back to the way in which it's getting appropriated in human rights discourses and the way in which intersectionality has become taken up in public policy contexts. It's been used in UN documents for example, it's become part of a human rights language. This has concerned me because those kinds of appropriations need to be tracked and carefully monitored. Because human rights discourses are about homogenizing or universalizing intersectionality as a frame, and you cannot generalize intersectionality as a frame, it just doesn't work.

In what ways should intersectionality be reconceptualized? The way we understood your work, you suggest to reconfigure it as „assemblage“. Do you want to replace „intersectionality“ with „assemblage“ ?

You know, it's never an either or. Both intersectionality and assemblage are coexisting and often reinforcing and sometimes contradictory concepts in the work that I do; you cannot leave something like intersectionality behind and I would never advocate for that.

Can you tell us more about the concept of „assemblage“ ?

Intersectionality still privileges a subject formation, it still privileges THE SUBJECT. And this is where the assemblage comes in. Assemblage is something that theorists in Deleuzian philosophy have been working with for a long time. It is a way of thinking about bodies as opposed to subjects. And the matter of bodies as opposed to the consciousness of a subject identity.

You know, as Brian Massumi and others theorize, identity is a kind of retrospective formation, it's always retroactively that you decide on an identity because you're constantly moving. So this is one of the things that assemblage attempts to address. It's a destabilization of subject identification.

Assemblage is a way in which the body gets to be not just a socially constructed entity that a subject formation gets overlaid onto, but the body itself has its own properties. It's a different way of thinking about ontology, materiality, the question of matter. So why this matters – again – is that these identity components – race, class, gender, sexuality, nation – get broken down differently with assemblage. Assemblage looks at the ways in which bodies are being identified through sub-individual categories. For example: bioinformatics is interested in biometric surveillance such as measuring the kind of palpitation or sweat that you're producing. These are different ways of disaggregating or rematerializing bodies that do not fit into these race-class-gender categories, and this is a whole other way of codifying the body.

Again, this is not new, it's just that I saw a possibility for Queer Theory in addressing these different ways

of thinking about bodily inhabitation. Because even though Queer Theory critiques identity and says it's anti-identity, it's not anti-subject. It's not. It's still very much wedded to a subject formation. And this is one of the reasons why I have tried to introduce assem-

FURTHER READINGS:

Puar, Jasbir (2007, forthcoming)

Terrorist Assemblages : Homonationalism in Queer Times. Duke University Press.

Puar, Jasbir (2005)

Queer Times, Queer Assemblages, Social Text 23 (3-4), 121-140.



Prof. Dr. Jasbir K. Puar is assistant professor of Women's and Gender Studies at Rutgers University, New York, USA. She situates herself in a transnational feminist and queer theoretical context. Her research interests include gender, sexuality, globalization; postcolonial and diaspora studies; queer theory; South Asian cultural studies; and tourism studies. She has just finished her book on queer biopolitics, race and sexuality, and discourses of counter/terrorism.

Website:

<http://womens-studies.rutgers.edu/faculty/core.html#jp>